

CIICA CONVERSATION: Young adults: Transition to the workplace

31 July 2023: Facilitators: Qais Khan – CIICA/UK, Jana Beneito, Spain/Australia, Sam Egerton Kemp, UK

Observers, Robert Mandara, EURO-CIU/Finland, British, Sue Archbold, CIICA/UK

Introduction:

Thirteen CI users from 7 countries (Netherlands, Finland, UK, USA, Brazil, Spain, Netherlands) shared their experiences with CI in the fifth CIICA CONVERSATION FOR 18-30 young adults with cochlear implants. A therapist from India, audiologist from France and Teacher from Philippines also attended.

Qais introduced the session on the topic of transition to the workplace asking about experiences of applying for jobs, and the experience of the workplace, with the boss and colleagues. For example, when applying for a job, do you disclose your disability or not? How do you deal with lack of support?

This summary has been put together with the transcript, the chat room notes, and checking by several attendees. This group of young people are among the first to have CI: they were implanted later than is now the norm, typically with only one CI, and experienced with their families some of the early opposition to CI and continuing misunderstandings. Their conversation was lively.

Preparation for the workplace

Sam began by describing his time at college, becoming a chef and the way he was prepared for the workplace:

The college experience was great. It gave me a lot of inspiration about the workplace and what it could be like because the college kitchen was almost a simulation of what a workplace would be like. It was easy and smooth....

Going from college student to hotel was a big jump. A lot of people couldn't make that jump. When I went to working there, I realised that it would be incredibly difficult working there because they had people from all over the world and their accents were incredibly strong, so when I thought they said something they said something completely different.

It was difficult to have a conversation around the lunch table when we were having lunch.

The teacher from the Philippines contributed their preparation for their students for the workplace:

We do this kind of immersion sensitivity training with employers with the managers up to the head general manager of this hotel in Manila. ... before they let to meet our students... it is a very clear discussion and signed by all employees who are going to have our students with hearing disability. So, before they get to interact with our kids, with our students, they get a big knowledge. ... there should be name plates for everyone so they can know their names...

Work experience could be considered preparation for the workplace, but this could be challenging:

I recently did work experience in an office for the first time. The biggest problem was the other people working there... With new people it is significantly harder for me to hear them. ... it was just a whole room of 20 people, all who I couldn't hear. At this workplace they would shout at each other from across the room. I had no idea what was going on half the time, and it was actually a pretty good learning experience. One guy asked me to do something and I did not hear a word he said.

Applying for a job

Applying for jobs presented many challenges and one of the major ones was whether to disclose one's deafness or not. There was a wide-ranging discussion on this, with various views.

On my CV I don't put that I am deaf or autistic. I have put my social media page on there so they can see that... I would rather let an employer see me as a normal person – have an interview and they can see me personally and say, oh he's deaf and he has accomplished so much in his life. We'll take him...

I would now start putting your disability on the application form – it will show the employer that you have this experience. And they will be more open and understanding about how to help with communication. We have a person who is deaf and has cochlear implants and we can work with it.

The industry I work in (TV) ...there has been a wave recently of trying to make the industry more diverse. So, actually putting the fact that you have a disability on your application can be a positive thing because it means you can be shortlisted. ... it is great that people are trying to open up applications from people from diverse backgrounds. The problem is that you get in and then the accessibility is often not in place... feeling like a bit of contradiction in the workplaces, you know we want to hear from people with disabilities and from minorities but then there's no support when you get into the workplace.

I put in my cover letter and my resume that I am deaf. I was not feeling comfortable not telling them... I decided it is best for me if I tell, like H said, sometimes they want you there because of the question of diversity... in Brazil they have to have 10% of employees to have disability. ... sometimes... are they accepting you because of what you do or because of the law?

Yes, this is a weird balance... I am starting a new school – part of me is you should come out and say you are deaf straight away and the other part of me is maybe wait and get to know people first...

The different forms of law covering Disability in the workplace were discussed, in particular in reference to applying for jobs and the rights that you have:

When I applied for jobs, they kind of bend the rules of the Disability Act... Say you are not skilled enough for us or you need more experience...

The physical test required for the job can be an issue, when people don't understand about CI:

I got the job, and they send me to do a physical and I passed and then they had to do a hearing test. They told me I couldn't do it with my implants. So they made me keep them outside the cabin. I went in there, I didn't hear anything. The doctor comes in... oh you failed

the physical you can't have the job.... I am like ok can I speak to your supervisor... the supervisor was like there is nothing we can do about it.

There can be a problem with most CI users speaking so well:

I asked for an interpreter – they said why do you need an interpreter you speak so well...

In the workplace: challenges

When you have disclosed your deafness and asked for some adaptations for accessibility there was a feeling of vulnerability:

It is like you are vulnerable all the time, and you have to share that part of you with everybody.

I understand when you are working or you have a group conversation it tends to feel like you are left out.

Some employers do not understand about inclusion:

In my first job in Australia, where I live now... the employer said... its better if you don't say these things (asking for repetition) because people will look at you in another way, and they will like feel bad about you and that's not good. I was like what are you saying? This is not true. People don't care so much. they will repeat and that's it. it's just I have this hearing problem I just need you to talk slower or whatever. ...I have nothing to hide. ... it was shocking to me because I had never met that before.

In a busy workplace, if you do get support from your employer the issue may not lie with them:

When you tell your employer you have a hearing loss or a cochlear implant, they know right, but they are not really, in my experience who you are interacting with on a daily basis.. it is like 50 people, 28, whatever you are working with ... and you have to tell them individually and they are all busy. They don't have time to consider everything all the time. That is where I see the issue.

The whole team meeting in the morning was agony. I spent the time wishing I wasn't there.

I teach children (as a dancer) – it is very noisy and when I started I taught them like I am deaf. . Sometimes they forget! I just make some rules , when I clap silence. ... the studio is big its noisy. When I am teaching and the music is on I don't talk which I should do as a teacher. But I cannot do this because if I am talking I cannot hear the music. It is annoying! ... it takes so much time of my class...

When one's CI and/or HA are not working so well it adds to the issues; working in demanding environments needs optimally functioning technology as well as acoustics. In addition to the challenges of understanding what is required there could often be a feeling of isolation.

When we had lunch, I would sit on my own watching TV because I couldn't make a conversation with anyone because the whole café was so noisy all the time.

In the workplace: positive experiences

It was felt that barriers were being broken down and some progress being made about acceptance of deafness:

It is amazing we are seeing more actors with cochlear implants or with deafness on TV... more deaf people are applying themselves for things that most people would say, no I don't think that person can do it. They are breaking down barriers.

I think we have made a massive progression with it... it is also showing not only can we do these things but I think society actually has a lot to learn from deaf people... as soon as we open up so many doors for people with other disabilities or other need... People have a lot to learn from us.

There were several examples of positive experiences where employers and colleagues had been helpful: this often-required perseverance:

If someone comes in and starts to sign with a member of staff they come to get me. We know how to communicate well.

The job I am in now, I am a sailing counsellor at a local yacht club and it is a bunch of little kids you take out sailing ... I am in the water, outside all the time, I wear my Cis and the boss doesn't have an issue with it.

They just disregarded the disabilities ... they said it doesn't matter you are part of the team and we will take care of you. if I don't understand they write it down and if I still don't understand them they take me and show me what they want me to do.

In the workplace: strategies

There was a helpful discussion about strategies which had worked and been helpful and here one participant explained why she felt that the workplace was so much more complex than managing in education, which was likely to be a more supportive environment with support in place:

The struggles in the workplace are so much more complex (than in education) it is the first time in our lives that we are really confronted with quite an ableist culture and we are dealing in a professional setting with colleagues and clients ... so talking about awareness. ... trying to articulate the language this is what we need.. it's not like at school about where you sit, its kind of so much more than that. we need to be so much more direct and assertive.... I am constantly changing work environments it is really difficult because I am faced with a brand-new set of people with different voices, sat in a different part of the office and different acoustics. ... I am just going to try to send out an email when I meet the team telling everyone about my disability and the needs that I require. trying to be assertive .. if you want me to do the job that you have hired me to do and if you want me to do the best job I can do, these are my needs.

Other examples were given where having the courage to speak up and ask for help and been productive. It was felt that it never helped to pretend to understand – things only got worse.

Finally, I had to build up the courage to ask someone else – do you know what is happening? Because I don't.

My tactic was to make a friend and then have that friend repeat everything to me....

I work in a French bakery. I deal with customer service... and way too many times every day I constantly miss hear something but honestly, over time you learn not to be apologetic about it. Be like, I am sorry I am hard of hearing but can you repeat that? I ask them to repeat things because in my job it is stressful because when it comes to people spending money they are a little less understanding if I mess something up so, I learned to be more direct and clear when I misheard something. When you try and guess you got like 50/50 chance of getting it right or just embarrassing yourself.

In the long-term it is valuable if you have people asking questions, being curious. I take that opportunity to tell them about it and they can help support people. ... it definitely helps in my work environment ... everybody is so clear what my situation is with my hearing without (CI). It makes me feel more comfortable to ask for help, doesn't feel like a burden because they are like.. sorry wasn't paying attention. ... you get to a point where you start cracking jokes with each other

They aren't fully educated to what CI means and those situations where you are asked to take them off for whatever reason... I use those moments to embarrass them and so I take out my CIs and I cannot hear anything and then they would be like why can't you hear me? I'm like, you asked me to take them off. that is the only way I can hear.

Sometimes having CI Influenced the choice of the job: in spite of the understanding and change in behaviour, this participant left this job and got a job in her area of graphic design.

I had this airport job - ... I didn't say it (deaf) until a bit later and it was so difficult: completely different accents, some of them wear masks. The environment was arrivals, very busy and noisy a lot of people .. I could hardly understand anything hear anything I was desperate. ... they will think I am dumb. ... I explained to some people and they were like it is ok, it is ok. They still didn't really understand what the problem was and they were like we still like you to do the job.... To change it in my mind to take it as an opportunity to improve, and then after two months working there I really could tell the change.

Summary

Some key points to emerge:

- Acknowledgement of increasing acceptance of diversity in the workplace, including deafness
- In spite of this, both applying for jobs and negotiating accessibility in the workplace are complex
- It is complex to decide whether to disclose one's deafness in a job application or not; if not when and how to disclose
- Job application procedures, including physical examinations often show lack of understanding of CI
- Most CI users speak intelligibly and thus others don't recognise the challenges they face, particularly in groups or noisy or busy environments.
- While the employer may be aware of the issues, the challenges are with daily colleagues and clients
- In the workplace, some jobs are particularly challenging
- The workplace can be isolating experience
- There are positive experiences: where colleagues are helpful and where there is the possibility of explaining what is needed

- Confidence is needed to do this
- Working in such a workplace can give opportunities to increase understanding of deafness, of modern technologies and help others to communicate effectively
- This gives opportunities to advocate to improve the workplace and society for others too
- Strategies which work are to be up front and clear about what is needed, to ask, not to pretend to understand, to use humour
- The technology needs to function optimally.

Thanks to all participants for the fascinating discussion: to Qais, Sam and Jana for planning and leading and for those who were prepared to be there at inconvenient hours! We look forward to the next Conversation in two months' time.

Sue Archbold, 3 August, 2023.